

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER | "Director Q&A: Mike Newell," By Stuart Kemp.

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DIRECTOR Q&A



Mike Newell

The Great Expectations — and Harry Potter — helmer on making indies versus tentpoles and the challenges of filming a literary classic By Stuart Kemp

MIKE NEWELL TRAINED with Granada Television with the intention of going into theater directing. But he has ended up making films on both sides of the Atlantic with a directing résumé boasting a slew of high-profile U.S.-backed projects. He has worked with major talent including Johnny Depp, Al Pacino, Julia Roberts and most recently Jake Gyllenhaal and Ben Kingsley. He shot 1999's *Pushing Tin* in Toronto for Fox but can't quite remember if he's taken a movie to the film festival before. His latest movie sees him directing what many Brits regard as one of the country's greatest literary works, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, adapted for the screen by David Nicholls. The book has been made into a film six times before, including David Lean's 1946 classic, and has seen numerous TV adaptations as well. So Newell's task was to bring something fresh and relevant to the tale. He spoke with *The Hollywood Reporter* about presenting Dickens to a new audience, the

difference in making indie British movies versus big Hollywood fare and having a relative newcomer tackle a classic character.

Was Dickens always a source of material you wanted to film?

I was very keen on him when I was a student. I read the books with great enthusiasm. His writing, it is true to say, is something the British absolutely get. It's primary colors to them. Everything from the theatrical comic characters and the bleak, black, dark portrayal of England as a misery factory is meat and drink to a young person reading it for the first time. Dickens' ability to change between high comedy and bleakness and dark is something I have always thought was wonderful. The high comedy is almost musical. I was working with veteran screenwriter Michael Eaton on an entirely separate adaptation of Dickens — the long and complex *Dombey and Son* — for a TV miniseries but, as much as he tried, simply couldn't get it down to a broadcast suitable length.

Is Dickens' work as relevant in

terms of modern filmmaking and techniques as it ever was?

It is very difficult to answer that question. London at the time of the story, was the biggest, baddest, richest, most populous and dangerous place in the world. It served as a foundation in crime writing and very black, social realism. All of those things are still with us today — perhaps dissolved and not as potent as they once were but still present. It is my task as the filmmaker to make it something a modern audience can feel is relevant and affecting. It's a great classic story from a great classic writer, so you have to be very careful and draw out the relevance.

Can you describe the nature of the script discussions you had with David Nicholls?

The script was always very good. He's a tremendous writer, and I had admired his adaptation of one of my favorite books in literature, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which he'd done for BBC television. We didn't change very much of what he'd written at all. If anything, we tried to make it a little more grotesque and more ghost story at times. After all, Miss Havisham and Magwitch are very black, dark and highly drawn characters.

Dickens famously changed the ending to make it happier after Edward Bulwer-Lytton (of "it was a dark and stormy night" fame) complained it was too sad. Has Nicholls' script gone for a Hollywood ending with your adaptation?

No, no, he hasn't. One of the things we both felt was: we were interpreting the same ground as one of people's all-time favorites

in David Lean's classic adaptation. But that was done almost 70 years ago, and it was due for reappraisal. Lean in fact made a version of the ending not written by Dickens which was very melodramatic indeed and saw John Mills as Pip burst into Miss Havisham's hall and tear down the curtains shouting, "Let the light in." All very theatrical, camp and high melodrama. David wrote an incredibly nuanced, low-key ending where you are not sure where these characters would end up but there are hints of tendrils of emotions regrowing between Pip and Estella. So it's somewhere between Dickens' original bleak ending and Lean's melodramatic version.

The cast has a who's who of British thespians such as Ralph Fiennes, Helena Bonham Carter, Robbie Coltrane, Ewen Bremner, Jason Flemyng, Sally Hawkins and Holliday Grainger. How involved were you in the casting for the film?

Oh yes — in a proper movie, the director should endeavor to deliver a cast. Delivering a cast that the producers can sell and works for the material is absolutely essential. I had worked with [casting director] Susie Figgis, who've worked with before, and we arrived at this cast together.

The film stars Jeremy Irvine as Pip, the lead male character. What was it like steering a relative newcomer through such a major work?

He really took it on and delivered himself wholly into the hands of the character, the story and my hands as his director. He was tremendous for the other actors to work with because of his commitment, and Ralph loved it because he was so open and so straight with the emotions of the story. Pip is not an easy character to get along with. But Jeremy was not concerned about sanitizing him at all. All that is lumpy and sandpapery, much of it self-inflicted by the character, Jeremy took on. **THR**

Vital Stats

Nationality British
Born March 28, 1942
Film in Toronto *Great Expectations*
Selected filmography
Four Weddings and a Funeral, Donnie Brasco, Pushing Tin, Mona Lisa Smile, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Love in the Time of Cholera, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
Notable awards TWO BAFTA Film Awards and a Cesar for *Four Weddings and a Funeral*